

Memoirs of An Iowa Farm Girl

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MEMOIRS OF AN IOWA FARM GIRL

BY RAE McGRADY BOOTH

Mrs. Booth graduated from Perry High School in 1907 and then attended Capitol City Commercial College in Des Moines.



MRS. BOOTH

Since then she has held many interesting jobs including teacher, secretary to a state senator, and subscription manager for Fisherman Magazine. She now lives in retirement in Eustis, Florida. Following are excerpts from her memoirs, the entire manuscript can be seen in the manuscript collection at the Iowa State Historical Library.

My paternal grandparents inherited 160 acres of virgin prairie land in Boone county from an uncle who was given a "land grant" for his services in the Union Army during the Civil War. It was on that farm in 1889 that I was born. Some of my fondest memories of childhood are the hours I spent with my grandparents. Grandpa had a nice white beard and would let me braid it as I sat on his lap in his old rocking chair. He and grandma each had their own rocking chair and I firmly believe they were the first examples of perpetual motion. Grandma used to give me my bath every Saturday night in a large brass kettle behind the pot-bellied stove which stood on a large square of linoleum called "oilcloth" in those days.

My grandmother's father was a Methodist Circuit Rider after the family migrated to Ohio and grandmother was born in upper Sandusky while her father made his headquarters at the first Protestant Mission ever founded west of the Alleghanies. He later moved his family to Lima, Ohio, which was then wilderness, and founded Old Shawnee Church south of Lima. He was honored by a monument at this site, and he and many of Grandmother's relatives are buried there.

Grandfather was born near Circleville, Ohio, in 1832, and left fatherless at the age of three. His father, Alexander McGrady, Jr., died unexpectedly while on a cattle buying trip in eastern Ohio. My grandfather was "bound out" in 1839 to an uncle, George Ray, at Lexington, Illinois, where he spent his boyhood. He had two brothers, Samuel, who was "bound out" to another uncle and died in 1853, and a younger brother, George, who drowned in the Scioto River near Circleville.

Grandfather's mother remarried a Mr. Verdin, had a daughter by him, and is buried on the family farm near LaRue, Ohio. It was when my grandfather went on horseback to visit his mother's grave site that he stopped to visit an aunt, Elizabeth McGrady Darling, and met his first cousin, Elizabeth Irena Darling. They fell in love and were married January 6, 1853, and grandfather never did continue the trip to his mother's grave.

On May 3, 1853, Grandfather became 21 years old and came into possession of his father's estate as well as his deceased brothers' share. Then he departed with his 18-year old bride in a horse-drawn covered wagon on a journey westward. Driving horses instead of oxen was a sign of wealth in those days. They stopped briefly in McLain county, Illinois, and then went on to Ft. Des Moines, Iowa, arriving there on October 17, 1854. A wedding present of six hand-made chairs given by an uncle were tied onto the outside of the wagon, and brought west. Every one of those chairs is still in use, as solid as the day they were made. There were no bridges or railroads at that time, so the young couple crossed the Mississippi River on a ferry boat at Burlington, Iowa. Their first home was 2300 West Grand Avenue in Ft. Des Moines.

About two weeks after their arrival in Des Moines, Silas and Irena, accompanied by her brother Ellis Darling, drove to Greene county intending to enter government land. After locating the land they wanted, the two young men rode horseback to Des Moines to file their claims. Irena, who was only 19, remained alone in the wagon on the prairie with neither house nor human in sight. She told me years afterward that it never occurred to her to be afraid, yet there were Indians not far distant and the horrible Spirit Lake Massacre occurred only three years later in 1857. The men returned after several

days and decided not to remain on the Greene county land, so they returned to Des Moines and took up residence in November of 1854 at the northwest corner of 15th and Locust streets in Des Moines where my father, Frank D. McGrady, was born January 21, 1857.



MR. AND MRS. FRANKLIN D. MCGRADY

On May 31, 1862, Silas McGrady, Lewis Overmyer and Samuel Christy each drive two yoke of oxen hitched to a wagon from Des Moines to Denver. Their mission was to deliver 9,000 pounds of cured hams and bacon. They crossed the Missouri River at Council Bluffs. While in the Platte River valley in Nebraska, they were hit by a tornado which pulled out their wagon hammers and let the oxen run loose. It took them three days to recover the oxen. When they crossed the Platte River, their wagon skidded in quicksand and they lost 21 hams. The three young men travelled practically unarmed except for a butcher knife. They had a greyhound with them, but it just sat and stared when rabbits were routed. When the three reached Denver, they delivered the hams and bacon and sold the oxen and wagons.

Silas drove a stagecoach back as far as Omaha in return for his transportation and then rode as a passenger from Omaha to Des Moines. He carried \$51,000 in gold bullion and dust in buckskin bags for A. Y. Rawson back in Des Moines and returned safely to his family three months from the time he had left for Denver.

I remember hearing my father tell about the absence of his father on the Denver trip. Grandmother Irena was a frugal person and would not spend one cent of their savings, fearing that Silas might never return from such a dangerous trip. So she took in sewing and made dress shirts with stiff bosoms which were worn by wealthy men of the era. Dad was only 5 years old then but he said he could remember that at times they had nothing to eat but cornbread spread with lard.

During his residence in Des Moines, grandfather Silas served as street commissioner. He had the contract for preparing the ground for the Iowa State Capitol building and he placed a few mementoes in its cornerstone. He was also in the general merchandise business at one time and received goods which were shipped up the Des Moines River. I have an old fashioned bureau which came from his store and was said to be the first bureau with attached mirror that was ever shipped into Des Moines. My dad said he could remember

its arrival, and many of the neighborhood women called to see this unusual bit of furniture. Dad also remembered one of the first shipments of bananas that reached Des Moines. Each banana sold for 25 cents apiece, and Dad sat on a fence nonchalantly eating one and gloating over other neighborhood children.

My parents were married in 1880. My mother was born near Pleasantville in Marion county and her father was a surgeon in the Union Army. Her mother had a hard time taking care of the family during those years and consequently she died when my mother was only 10 years old. She was 20 when she and my father were married and they lived with my grandparents at 909 Ninth street, Des Moines, where my eldest brother was born.

The family moved to our Boone county farm in the fall of 1881 and lived in the new barn until they could build a house. The land was bare, virgin soil, and there was not a tree in sight. They set out a grove of lovely willow trees north of the house for a windbrake, and planted maples, cottonwoods and box-elders in the houseyard, in addition to an orchard of apple, cherry and plum trees.

I don't think my father was ever cut out to be a farmer, having lived to the age of 23 in the "city" of Des Moines. He had been reared in a religious atmosphere; grandmother, he said, was a "rock-ribbed and rubber-coated" Methodist. There was no card-playing, dancing, smoking or profanity permitted when she was around. She read her Bible every day and family prayers were held at night. Both she and grandpa refused to attend my commencement exercises when I graduated from Perry High School in 1907 because the event was held in the opera house, that "den of iniquity!"

Grandmother was a rather hard task-master and was critical of her young daughter-in-law. She frowned on fancy, curly hair-dos, ruffled dresses, and was also a firm believer in birth control. She had but one child herself and often said her own mother "made a sow of herself" by having eight children.

Mother had pretty, delicate hands and I heard my grandmother criticize her "poor nails" because she could not scrape pots and skillets with her fingernails.

By the time I joined the family of two boys and two girls, my grandparents bought an adjoining 40 acres of land and built a home for themselves there. I was often sent to stay with my grandparents and spent many happy hours and even weeks with them, probably because Mother wanted me out from under her feet as she had four older children to take care of and there was another one on the way—much to grandmother's disgust!



PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS
SILAS AND IRENA MCGRADY

One of my earliest memories is of my fourth birthday when my grandfather gave me enough red calico for a dress and grandmother gave me a tea set made of pewter, which I still have and not one tiny piece is missing. This was in August, 1893, the year of the "great panic" when William Jennings Bryan was making his famous speeches about "The Crown of Thorns and Cross of Gold." It was during those "panic" years that I saw my father grease his wagons with butter, which he had plenty of, rather than drive seven miles to buy axle grease. I also remember the two-bushel baskets of corn which were brought inside to be burned for fuel. The nearest market for the corn was ten miles west of the farm and the coal mines were ten miles east along the Des Moines River, so why not just burn the corn which was cheaper than coal?

In the summer of 1894 my mother was taken sick and was bedfast for weeks with what the family doctor said was "milk leg." Mother later told me that she had a miscarriage. I remember a fine neighbor woman, Mary King, who came every day and helped take care of her. After Mother's right leg had been resting on a pillow and had grown stiff, Mary King carefully drew the feathers out of the pillow one at a time until the leg could be straightened out without pain. Mother was always a cripple after that. At first she used crutches and later walked by pushing a kitchen chair in front of her. My father had a folding chair made to order, upholstered in red plush, in which she could recline and raise herself to a sitting position. I only can picture my mother one time before she was a cripple, and she was running in the rain to get her young chickens into shelter.

I also remember one Christmas during the "panic" when there was no money for gifts. Dad brought an evergreen tree from the timber lands a few miles distant and Mother popped corn which we children strung to trim the tree and make festoons in the living-room. There was one orange for each of us and Mother, no doubt with her heart breaking, explained to us that she had asked Santa to take our gifts to the children of the poor coal miners on the Des Moines River who would

otherwise have no gifts. We six children fell for her story wholeheartedly and felt happy and self-righteous because we had helped the poor children. It never occurred to us that *we* were the poor children!

We always had plenty to eat, however. We had a large strawberry patch and I can remember seeing the old extension kitchen table piled high with all the berries it would hold. It was a tiresome job for small children to sit for hours stemming strawberries, but it was worth it when we tasted the yummy shortcakes and later the strawberry jam in winter. We also had a long row of "pie plant," or rhubarb, a patch of raspberry bushes, many trees of red plums, a number of Dutchess apple trees and cherry trees. Sister Bess once picked her apron lap full of rabbit droppings under the bushes and proudly carried them to Mother thinking they were raspberries. We always had a large vegetable garden, where we found the long, slim Jersey sweet potatoes which we liked to eat with our hands, buttering each bite as we ate. We usually had mush and milk on Saturday night for supper unless Dad went to the village seven miles away and brought home oysters. Then we had oyster soup with those little round crackers which the grocer dished out of an open barrel.

Dad always kept a few hives of bees and in winter months he peddled the countryside with honey and his home-grown buckwheat flour. I remember the syrup Mother made from corn cobs, it was lickin' good!

We also raised chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese. Grandmother raised guineas and peacocks, but she always called them "peafowls." In addition to using the geese and ducks for their meat and eggs, we used the feathers for beds and pillows. I would catch them and Mother would pick the nice, soft down from their breasts. But before there were enough

feathers for beds, our mattresses were filled with clean, sweet-smelling straw after the threshing was finished each year.

Threshing days were big events for the children. We looked forward to the day when the big steam engine pulled into the barnyard followed by the horse-drawn water tank. All the neighbors pitched in to help each other. A few men with hay-racks brought the sheaves of grain from the fields of oats or barley—wheat was not grown in Iowa at that early date. Several men were required to process the grain through what was called the separator, boys were needed to cut the binder twine with which each sheaf was tied, while others manned the wagons into which the fine grain was loaded and then hauled to the granary where they shoveled it from the wagons by hand. If my grandfather could see one of the modern threshing outfits I believe he would run for his life, scared by such a monster!

Our farm was always well-stocked with cattle and hogs. Butchering and curing of meat was all done at home. There was a large iron kettle in the backyard where the fat was rendered into lard and homemade soap was made from grease and lye.

At one time there were 28 cows to be milked morning and night. I would get up early every morning and milk seven cows, then my younger brother and I would drive them to a pasture one-half mile north. Then we would return home, dress for school and walk $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles west to the one-room country schoolhouse. At night the same chore was repeated after filling the mangers with hay pitched from the hayloft, placing corn in the feed boxes, gathering eggs, and pumping water for all the livestock.



McGRADY FAMILY PICTURE TAKEN IN 1899

When Dad bought the 70-foot windmill, I thought it must be the tallest thing in the world! We no longer had to latch onto the old pump handle to keep tanks filled with water for 60 head of cattle and several horses and hogs. We thought we had gone "modern" for sure when later Dad bought a tread mill which was run by an old blind mare as she ran a 70-gallon churn. The cream was skimmed from milk pans kept in the cellar until Dad bought the separator to separate the cream from the milk. Finally a creamery was started about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from our home, industry came to the land, and the route man came by and picked up the ten-gallon cans each morning. All that wonderful equipment: the separator, the treadmill and the 70-gallon churn were obsolete. We children always hoped that the washing machine could be attached to the treadmill, but that dream was never realized and we still had to crank the old washer by hand. One time before we had

all this modern equipment, sister Bess and I were doing the churning by hand when I started turning the wheel in the opposite direction, Bess yelled to Mother to make me quit before I "unchurned" the butter!

Fertilizer was not a product of chemistry then, it was just plain manure piled up behind the barn until early spring when it was hauled out and scattered over the ground before plowing started. Fields of corn stalks were burned instead of being plowed into the soil. The words "pasteurization," "fluoridation," "refrigeration" and "sterilization" were unknown. Butter was hung in the well to keep it cool. Vaccination was also unknown. Children wore a small bag of asafoetida around their necks to ward off disease. An infected foot, which was frequent, was said to have "proud flesh" and was doctored with a poultice of fresh cow manure, which worked! A cut hand was covered with cobwebs.

May 10th each year was the official date for starting to go barefoot and this continued until after the first frost in the fall. Although we loved to go barefoot, we also loved new shoes that squeaked. I was flabbergasted when a teacher actually suggested that I should soak my shoes in water so they would not squeak any more. I was proud of my new shoes and the squeak informed all those present that I was wearing a new pair.

We had three terms of school per year, a fall term of two months, a winter term of three months and a spring term of two months. Boys from 12 on up usually attended only the winter term since they had to help plant crops in the spring and harvest them in the fall. One term we had no school because there was no money to pay a teacher. The country schools were stationed two miles apart, and we lived one mile from a school in either direction.

Teacher's pay was small in those days. My eldest sister started teaching country schools at the age of 18, after graduating from high school and attending one summer session at Cedar Falls State Normal College. Her first salary was \$23 per month, and she boarded with a nearby farm family, paying \$2.50 a week for board and room. She saved enough from her salary to buy me my first new winter coat of tweed and velvet when I was 14 and in high school, before I had always worn hand-me-downs.

The country school-teachers had to build the fires in the school rooms and sometimes they paid a male student a small sum to do this for them. They also did janitor work and furnished their own bells which they rang to summon the students to class. One of my sisters had to chase a wolf out of the coal shed before she could get fuel for the fire.

The school library was small, but well-stocked. The bookcase was about four feet high and two feet wide with one shelf, and it contained works by Shakespeare, Tennyson, Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, Lowell, James Fennimore Cooper and Washington Irving. We used McGuffey's spellers and readers, and we studied geography, physiology, civics, reading, penmanship (Spencerian) and mathematics. We had no gymnasium at school since we all had plenty of exercise at home doing our chores. We had a "spell down" every Friday night at the close of the school day, and there was always a picnic on the last day of school in the spring. Grandmother wore her false teeth to these picnics, but otherwise she left them out and chewed with her gums.

In December, 1901, Dad called Dr. Barnard, the dentist, because he was suffering from toothaches. While my older brother drove to the village to bring the dentist back, Dad drank some whisky to kill the pain, and after the dentist ar-

rived, he sat while all his teeth were pulled out. The dentist charged \$5.00 for his evening's work, then Dad finished the bottle of whisky and the pain was forgotten.

During the summer months many gypsies would pass through the countryside. These weary Jewish peddlars with packs on their backs usually carried many interesting things to sell. Mother would invite them in to spread out their wares, then she would buy a few items and serve them a snack. Some of the covered wagons that passed our farm were homesteaders with all their possessions heading for the Dakotas to take land. We welcomed the homesteaders, and they would unhitch and water their horses and then come into the house for food and sleep in their wagons in the barnyard.



THE McGRADY HOME

A few of the things one always saw around the house were: kerosene lamps and lanterns which had to be cleaned daily; a toothpick holder was always found on a well-set table; a lady's dressing table had a hair receiver where she placed her

combings which were saved to make a switch later; fly swatters were branches of trees and the whole family chased flies before we could sit down to a meal; there was usually a hammock in the yard made of barrel staves and wire and seldom occupied; there were fancy lamps with glass shades and crystals hanging in the center of the front room; a few Currier & Ives prints were on the walls; a "piddy pot" was under each bed and always frozen solid in wintertime; and most homes were well-supplied with spittoons. Dad preferred to use the stove rather than a spittoon, and one of our neighbors just stomped a hole in his kitchen floor instead of a more conventional spittoon. Fruit was canned in stoneware jars and sealed with wax. Hog's intestines were used for stuffing sausage. Dad would use a short piece of railroad iron to crack walnuts for us on winter nights. Such things as button hooks for fastening the high button shoes and husking pegs for husking the corn were a must to be found in every home.

My father's cradle, in which all seven of his children and many of his grandchildren were rocked and slept, is now in the Iowa State Historical building in Des Moines. Grandmother's old treadle sewing machine and charcoal stove are also in the museum.



FRANKLIN D. MCGRADY
AT AGE 20, TAKEN 1877

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